

My name is Tara Pagliaro. I am a parent and a speech and language pathologist. My daughter Grace is 7 years old and has Dyslexia. I live in Granby, CT and am in support of Senate Bill No. 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia, but I am requesting that additional supports be added to this bill. It is not comprehensive enough to include the provision of needed supports and interventions for our students with Dyslexia. Let me begin with an overview of my journey with Dyslexia.

When my daughter Grace was in preschool, I was aware that she was struggling with learning letters, and sounds, and had difficulty with her speech production. I brought my concerns to the attention of the public school. They screened her speech and found that she was doing “fine”. Although I voiced my concern regarding her difficulty with the acquisition of phonological awareness, they did not feel that there was a need to pursue testing in this area due to her age. This pattern continued until first grade. This is when she really began struggling and disliking school. She would come home in tears, and tell me that she was stupid. No matter how many meetings or conferences that I requested, no one was willing to look deeper into the situation. I was always told to give things time, or that her difficulties were developmentally appropriate and other children had similar difficulties. By the middle of first grade, the teacher voiced concerns about Grace’s difficulty in math. She began receiving extra help in this area. I continued to push for reading help. She was demonstrating an appropriate DRA so there was still no concern on their end. I asked them to look at Grace’s ability to decode nonsense words effectively. I explained that she was not able to identify and discriminate her short vowel sounds effectively. The teacher finally began to see the same issue and my daughter received some support through SRBI. I knew that more needed to be done so after the teacher voiced her concern that Grace was “just not understanding the vowels” as she thought she would once she had more practice, I met with the principal. I told her directly that I thought that Grace had Dyslexia, but she stood firm in her belief that my daughter was “too young to be tested”. I would not let that deter me so I called a PPT meeting and formally made the request for a psycho-educational evaluation. My daughter could not decode words. She was memorizing and guessing words when she read. Knowing that the foundational skills of reading were of utmost importance, and that the shift from learning to read to reading to learn was so close, I pushed until the school agreed to test her. Unfortunately, it was the end of the school year and I was told that we’d have to wait until the fall to begin her testing. With that, September arrived and we had a PPT meeting to review the plan. I made the request for specific reading evaluations, but the team was very resistant. They had a standard battery of tests that they typically assess with. I was firm that a test to assess phonological awareness and memory was needed. The school finally agreed. The end of November came and we reconvened for a PPT to review the results of testing. My daughter, based on her inability to achieved scores within the normal range, for phonological awareness was deemed eligible for services. A very brief feeling of relief passed over me, but I knew that this was just the beginning. “What is the plan of action?” I asked. “What are the next steps for Grace?” The principal reviewed the amount of reading services that Grace would receive, but could not tell me how they were going to target her objectives. I told them that she needed a multisensory, structured language approach. I again asked what that would look like. They hesitated. I suggested an Orton Gillingham based approach, and was then told they could try Foundations with her. It was very clear to me that they had no real plan.

It should not be this difficult to get our children assessed. It should not be so difficult to have a plan of remediation in place that is specific to the needs of Dyslexia. Our children are smart, they want to learn, they want to succeed, they want to be like their non-Dyslexic peers, but they struggle. They have learned many compensatory strategies to get themselves by. They shouldn’t be learning to get by, but learning to succeed. Our teachers need to know what to look for so that our children do not fall any further through the cracks contributing even more to this devastating reading gap in the state of CT. They need to be adequately trained. All staff needs to have the knowledge and understanding of Dyslexia. They need to evaluate, identify early, educate, and accommodate our students with Dyslexia. They should be specially trained in using a multisensory, structured language approach. The speech and language pathologist should be directly involved in the remediation process as the core deficits with Dyslexia are language based and phonological in nature. Professional development that is proven and effective in identifying, intervening, and education students with Dyslexia are highly needed and have been for a very long time. Teachers are coming out of Institutions of Higher Education lacking the knowledge and skills to teach students with Dyslexia. They graduate with a very basic overview of reading and how to teach it. The foundational skills and direct ties to language are not a focus therefore leaving our teachers to fend for themselves in the classroom. I have heard testimony after testimony from teachers all over CT. They are voicing their concerns and standing up to state that they do not know how to teach reading, especially to our children with Dyslexia. They want to help our children. We

want them to help our children. It is up to you to make this happen. We need to raise the bar, set the standards higher so that the state of CT no longer has the largest reading gap. We have the power to change the lives of so many children for the better and change can start now.

Early screening legislation would have helped my daughter not only be labeled as Dyslexic, but start her on her educational path with the supports that she needed to feel confident, and successful when it came to learning to read. Instead, my daughter felt defeated, embarrassed, and stupid. She often compared herself to her peers and cried with feelings of self-worthlessness. We as parents and educators strive so hard to instill a love of learning at an early age. We look to empower children academically, socially, and emotionally. Instead of supporting our learners with early identification, they have been systemically broken down little by little, crushing the little intrinsic motivation they have left. For every time my daughter had to read aloud and couldn't read a word correctly, for every time she looked at her book bin only to see that she was at the lowest level compared to her friends, for every time she tried her hardest to read the same chapter books that everyone else was reading, for every time she felt broken and not good enough just pushed her farther away. My daughter is an amazingly sweet and talented young girl. She is loving, and artistic. She cares for her friends and loves animals. My daughter is a child who is Dyslexic. My daughter will have Dyslexia her entire life. She will have constant reminders of her struggles. It is our time right now to make a change, to instill the lost confidence, to build the love of learning, and to empower our children so that they don't fall through the cracks, so that they shine bright like the stars that they are.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Bill no. 1054 and to be a voice for my daughter.

Sincerely,

Tara M. Pagliaro